

Social justice and the role of young Adventist activists

With the choking death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the shooting death of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky, both at the hands of police, many pastors and youth leaders are finding that their young people, of all colors, are feeling moved to do something. But what? How should they respond?

What follows is some guidance for a younger generation that deeply respects the Word of God and wants to walk in His Spirit while seeking to beat back the forces of racism, injustice, and violence. This guidance offers three revolutionary challenges from God's Word, along with practical and spiritual ways to apply them.

1. Get warmer, not colder

Jesus warned, in Matthew 24:12, that as this world nears its end, “the love of most people will grow cold.”¹ In verse 13, He encouraged the church not to follow this trend but to “endure” in love to the end. Jesus is calling Adventist youth to get warmer, not colder. The greatest litmus test of a true follower of Jesus is whether they “have love and unselfish concern for one another” (John 13:35).

In what practical ways can we get warmer? This love is supernatural and happens only when the Holy Spirit is poured out in response to prayer. Romans 5:5 says, “God’s love has been abundantly poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit.” Luke 3:21, 22 tells us that while Jesus was praying, “the Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form like a dove.”

God is calling the young people in your church to join in small groups of two or more to pray for love to motivate their actions. Many have skipped this only to discover that their activism

accomplishes little or even makes matters worse. Why? Because it lacks the supernatural power of God. Prayer, therefore, is not just preparation for action; it is the most important part of our action.

Action step 1. Form a small action group and meet regularly in person or online to pray for supernatural love through the Holy Spirit. As you pray, as the disciples did in Acts 1 and 2, God will fill you with the attributes of Jesus, the “fruit of the Spirit,” found in Galatians 5. Someone once said that we are the nail on which God hangs His portrait. It’s time for God’s people to stand out in stark contrast to the evil around them.

2. Get angry, not evil

Are you angry right now? God says, “Be angry [at sin—at immorality, at injustice, at ungodly behavior], yet do not sin” (Eph. 4:26). Ellen White says, “It is true there is an indignation that is justifiable, even in the followers of Christ. When they see that God is dishonored, and His service brought into disrepute, when they see the innocent oppressed, a righteous indignation stirs the soul. Such anger, born of sensitive morals, is not a sin.”²

Anger is an emotion that God feels, too, so it is right for us to be angry when we see or experience evil. But what are we doing with our anger? God desires that all young Adventist activists channel their anger toward positive and righteous ends. The Bible teaches us to overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:21). In other words, we can never overcome injustice with more injustice or violence with more violence or racism with more racism. Many have tried and ultimately failed. Young Adventist activists can use only the tools that God uses—righteousness, peace, truth, and love.

Didn’t Jesus endorse destroying property? Jesus did overturn the tables of the money changers



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(Matt. 21:12), but He did not steal their money, burn down their temple, destroy their property, beat up people, or kill anyone. Unlike Jesus, have you allowed anger to lead you into sin? If so, you are not alone. Even Christ's disciples were tempted to call fire down from heaven when their Savior was the target of Samaritan racism (see Luke 9). Although patient, Jesus warned them that they were being manipulated by the wrong spirit (v. 55)—a warning no doubt for us today, as well.

Should Adventists march in protest? Protesting is a right, and peacefully speaking out against evil is our sacred responsibility (Eph. 5:11). Some say we should pray but not protest, because morality is a matter of the heart. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "It may be true that morality cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated. It may be true that the law cannot change the heart, but it can restrain the heartless."³

We should ask ourselves three questions to guide our actions: (1) What is the protest about, and are these values in line with the Bible? (2) Who are the leaders in this protest, and while they may not share my Christian beliefs, do they embrace my values? (3) What kind of spirit is motivating this protest, and is it a positive one? In John 18, a mob, motivated by Satan, came to arrest Jesus in Gethsemane. They were carrying torches and swords. Their bad spirit was so contagious that Peter committed violence (v. 10). Jesus rebuked him and everyone else being influenced by prevailing evil.

Protect yourself by avoiding all protests that display or start to display hateful, illegal, or un-Christian behavior, recognizing that retaliatory protests are comprised of instigators of violence. Ellen White stated, "I am so wearied and tired out with the heartless manner in which human, erring man treats his brother, who may be just as

much beloved of God as he himself is. . . . There is no excuse for this manner of dealing, and in the name of the Lord I protest against it."⁴

Aren't sympathy, empathy, and prayer enough? Young Adventist activists need to do more than just verbally protest. It is not enough for us to be sympathetic or empathetic toward those in need of our help. "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters" (1 John 3:16, NIV). True love, as modeled by Jesus on Calvary, includes selfless action. "Little children (believers, dear ones), let us not love [merely in theory] with word or with tongue [giving lip service to compassion], but in action and in truth [in practice and in sincerity, because practical acts of love are more than words]" (v. 18).

In the name of Jesus and under His banner, we need to help the suffering. On their way to the temple, Peter and John saw a lame man begging (Acts 3). They did not tell the man they would pray for him or that they were sorry for him; instead, Peter and John helped him up in the name of Jesus (v. 6) and brought him into the church. If you want to make a difference against evil, then do all your acts of love in Christ's name and under His banner alone.

Action step 2. In your small group, ask God to give you a plan to implement right away. As Jesus gave Joshua a plan to tear down the "impregnable" walls of Jericho (Joshua 5; 6), God will give your prayer team a strategy to successfully tear down the walls of racism, injustice, and violence. Nehemiah, one of the greatest leaders in the Old Testament, brought his concerns for his oppressed people before the Lord (Nehemiah 1; 2). God impressed him with a bold and righteous plan that would build up his city,

not tear it down. God also miraculously provided the resources Nehemiah needed to achieve God's plan. Nehemiah used his position as the king's cupbearer to make things happen.

Here are several questions your action group can discuss:

1. Which evil is most prevalent in our community—violence, racism, injustice, poverty, privilege, disease, drugs, prostitution, abuse, white-collar or blue-collar crime, or other issues? Which evil do we feel most passionately against and which are we most equipped to fight?
2. What opportunities to be the hands and feet of Jesus are in front of us as a group? What doors are being opened in response to our prayers? Do we need to create a ministry to meet the need or simply help a ministry that already exists?
3. What influential platforms do we have (jobs, titles, town hall meetings, or others) that can be leveraged, and whom do we know who can help us push back against evil and minister to the suffering?
4. What can we do right now? What action steps must we take, and who will be responsible for what on our team?
5. Are these plans that God would approve of? Will they lead to both temporal and eternal benefit? Do our plans harmonize with God's Word and rightly reflect His character? How will our plans give glory to God and lead people to a saving knowledge of Jesus?

3. Get louder, not softer

Now is not the time to be silent, especially as it pertains to our message. The Adventist movement has been called by God to take the three angels' messages to the world, which needs this truth now more than ever. Adventists are not better than other Christians, but we most certainly have been given a greater responsibility—"to whom much has been given, much will be required" (Luke 12:48).

The three angels' messages of Revelation 14 highlight the fact that God cares more about justice than we do. "Fear God [with awe and reverence], and give Him glory [and honor and praise in worship], because the hour of His judgment has come" (v. 7). In fact, the conclusion of the messages describes God's eradication of evil once and for all (vv. 17–20).

Nobody will, ultimately, get away with racism, violence, and injustice. The Lord will soon bring

justice, and so we must not be discouraged at how eerily resilient evil remains. We are still behind enemy lines, but, praise God, Jesus is coming, and we must get louder, not softer, regarding this good news.

Action step 3. Maybe you, too, are convicted of your own need to get right with the coming Judge. Perhaps in your own heart, you have discovered racism, bigotry, hatred, injustice, violence, lust, and evil in its various forms. If so, I encourage you to go by faith in private, or with your small group, to the bloodstained cross of Jesus. Confess your sins and lay the heavy burden of your guilt, regret, fear, and condemnation on His shoulders. Jesus will forgive you and give you His spirit of grace, love, and forgiveness. Now, with this gospel in your heart, use your group's action plan to lift up Jesus as you minister to human needs. Warn those who participate in evil of the coming judgment, but with grace in your heart, point repentant sinners to the Cross, where you found grace.

Joy to the world

Every Christmas, Christians love to sing the hymn "Joy to the World." Most think it was written to celebrate the first coming of Jesus. However, the inspiration for this song came from Psalm 98, which concerns the second coming of Jesus, not the first. The composer, Isaac Watts, wanted God's people to be encouraged by the joyful news of the soon return of Jesus!

How does the Second Coming bring joy to the world? Notice how Psalm 98 answers this question clearly and relevantly in its last few verses: "Let the sea thunder and roar, and all the things it contains, the world and those who dwell in it. Let the rivers clap their hands; let the mountains sing together for joy and delight before the LORD, for He is coming to judge the earth; He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with fairness" (vv. 7–9).

The tragic deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor are symptoms of an evil world into which we are called to bring joy. By God's grace—and by following His methods—we can do just that.



- 1 Scripture is from the Amplified Bible, except where noted.
- 2 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898), 310.
- 3 Martin Luther King Jr. "The Hearts and Habits of Men: MLK on Law and Morality," <https://www.letterstotheexiles.com/hearts-habits-men-mlk-law-morality>
- 4 Ellen G. White, Letter 50, March 12, 1897, par. 34.